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Thousands Jam Job Fair to Apply for Federal Government Openings

By V. Dion Haynes
Washington Post Staff Writer
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They came in droves wearing dark suits and carrying résumés yesterday -- some lined up for a block in the hot sun waiting for the doors to open -- to the only employer in this dismal economy hiring by the thousands: the federal government.

More than 6,000 people jammed into the National Building Museum in Washington to apply for openings at 75 agencies, including the departments of Treasury, Homeland Security, Justice, Veterans Affairs and Energy.

"In private industry, all they have to do is tap you on the shoulder, and you're gone," said Jacqueline Shipp, 42, who during the past two years was laid off from a bank and then a cash-advance service.

But in the government, added Shipp of Silver Spring, "you get stability, you get great benefits and [an opportunity] to move up and progress in your job."

The federal government represents about one-third of the Washington region's \$401 billion economy. Some analysts said they think the ramp-up in federal hiring and spending will help the area emerge from the recession before most other metropolitan regions.

From May 2008 to May 2009, the region lost 55,000 jobs. But during that same period, nearly 20,000 jobs were created, mainly in the federal government and federal contracting sector. Some analysts say they expect the net job losses by the end of the year to disappear, becoming a net gain of 10,000 jobs.

"We will come out of [the recession] faster, stronger and with more staying power," said James C. Dinegar, president and chief executive of the Greater Washington Board of Trade.

Still, with little relief on the horizon for private-sector job losses, analysts said, full recovery is expected to be a long and painful process; the unemployment rate is expected to continue climbing for at least one more year.

"It's unlikely many unemployed persons would be qualified to fill" the federal jobs, said Stephen S. Fuller, director of the Center for Regional Analysis at George Mason University. "Most of the unemployed are retail and construction workers and don't have the skills."

The Partnership for Public Service, a nonprofit that sponsored the job fair and is surveying federal agencies to determine their staffing needs, estimates that the government will hire about 600,000 people over the next four years, as many as 120,000 of whom would work in the Washington region.

The federal workforce, currently at 1.9 million, is expected to grow to about 2.1 million during the Obama administration, according to the Partnership for Public Service. That is comparable to the staffing level during the Johnson administration's Great Society programs of the 1960s. About one-third would be new jobs, and the rest would fill vacancies, including those from retirements, which are expected to double to 1 million over the next seven years, according to the PPS.

"I've got 22 openings today," said LaWanda Thomas, national recruitment coordinator for the Agriculture Department. "We will lose 100 veterinarians over the next few years [to retirement], and we're reaching out to college students."

The Government Accountability Office is hiring 100 additional auditors and analysts to detect fraud and waste in the Troubled Assets Relief Program and economic stimulus programs. The Department of Housing and Urban Development is hiring about 600, nearly five dozen of whom include analysts who would oversee and track recovery funds.

And numerous intelligence agencies -- including the FBI, CIA and National Security Agency -- are beefing up their complement of foreign language specialists, scientists, engineers, computer analysts, sociologists, anthropologists and special agents to fight terrorism. "We're expanding by many, many thousands of positions," said Ronald P. Sanders, chief human capital officer for the Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

That is good news for Marcus Sumler, 53, of Hyattsville who was laid off in December and is seeking a CIA or FBI information technology job. "My severance package lasted until May, and now my unemployment has kicked in," he said. "I've got to find something."

Experts say the federal hiring boom will intensify competition for workers between the public and the private sectors, possibly resulting in higher wages and better perks in the region.

While the government currently cannot always match private-sector salaries, job seekers say it can offer something else: stability in an unsteady economy, a sense of mission and, in some cases, student loan forgiveness and tuition reimbursement programs.

Alexander Moore, 22, who recently graduated with an economics degree from the College of William and Mary, said he hopes the Bureau of Economic Analysis will hire him and help pay for a master's degree.

"If you would have asked me six to eight months ago [about his employment preference], it would have been the private sector," Moore said. "Now it's the public sector, because it's becoming a bigger part of our society."